The aesthetics of 'time-reckoning': a Guna chromatic history*

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Abstract

This is a study of time and aesthetics through an ethnographic analysis of an indigenous visual system. Looking at historical changes in women's clothing and village patterns among Guna people (Panama) the article shows that images and artefacts are key to shed light on indigenous historicities. Core visual and material processes encapsulate and manifest biographical and group time. By the same token such processes provide a privileged perspective to consider how present day social relations are the product of long-term historical transformations. The analysis draws on the relatively overlooked notion of 'chromatism' developed by Lévi-Strauss and subsequently elaborated by Stolze Lima as 'chromatic sociality'. It proposes that 'chromatism' is an indigenous category that allows for reckoning with the passing of time and the shifting circumstances of history.

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This article is a study of historical changes among Guna people from the San Blas Archipelago of Panama through an exploration of variations in women's clothing. Considering how the individual and collective experiences of time are refracted and rendered meaningful through specific images and material practices I will discuss history as the manifold engagements with unfolding events in the world. Such engagements, I will contend, are articulated across space and time by means of images and artefacts alike. By looking at how the colourful materials and designs of Guna women's clothing have changed in time I ask what such changes tell us about the biographical experiences of different generations of women. Concurrently, identifiable visual transformations operated by women on their clothing reflect wider social transformations. Sewing their colourful decorated clothes Guna women offer a perspective on time and history that competes with what could be achieved through language or other modes of communication. This, I will argue, provides an example of the recursivity between aesthetic forms and personal and collective experiences of time.

My aim is to explore connections between transformations in visual style and their historicity. I will thus look at specific images of time (Gell 1992). By considering the intrinsic dynamism of human social experience and its capacity to deal with the vicissitudes of history we catch sight of its multi-faceted nature. Yet, by identifying the axes of coherence between aesthetics and social life we are able to look closely at how objects and visual systems change. In doing so we learn about the history of the people who meaningfully engage with such

material and aesthetic changes. An ethnographic study that explores the historicity of aesthetic categories has thus the potential to shed light on the historicity of human social experience.

I will describe how Guna women and men actively exploit transformations in visual style to reckon with the passing of biographical, intergenerational and historical time. In doing so I will show how chromatism - the qualitative relation between quantities: of colours, people, concepts, or anything else for that matter - may be considered an indigenous (cross-cultural) category amenable to historical analysis. I suggest we can study the differential relations that chromatism allows us to see in an historical fashion - without the need to take it as a rigid framework for the definition of 'culture as opposed to nature', as Lévi-Strauss (1969) originally formulated in his study of the myths of origin of fish poison and of illnesses in South America. Looking at transformations in Guna social life and in their visual style, as well as at processes relative to personal power as in the case of seers, I suggest that chromatism is a dynamic category that allows for reckoning with the passing of time and the changing circumstances of history. As such chromatism falls within the wider remit of 'historicity' defined by Hirsch and Stewart as 'a dynamic social situation open to ethnographic investigation' (2005: 262). In what follows I will address the problem of how to draw on the diachronic dynamism internal to Amerindian lived worlds to carry out an historical analysis based on their visual systems.

Much anthropological research has concentrated on the meaning and symbolism of colours in different societies. The debate about the universal status of colour

classifications is still ongoing since the works of Turner (1967), Berlin and Kay (1969) and Sahlins (1976), among others. It is in particular the evolutionary bent, associating social complexity to the complexity of colour terms, which has been criticized by a number of scholars (see for example Wierzbicka 1990; Chapman 2002; Surrallés 2016). It is undeniable that contact with colonial societies has led to the introduction of new materials and colours among indigenous peoples, but how exactly these new additions have been and are incorporated, understood, manipulated and used, is still a matter open to debate and investigation. The properties of coloured objects stimulate 'new ways of thinking' among indigenous peoples different from those of the peoples who introduced such novelties (Young 2011:357). Furthermore, and interesting for us, such new ways of thinking might reveal something about former ways of thinking and forms of agency.

In this paper I argue that stylistic changes in Guna women's clothing were strategies deployed to deal with the unforeseeable circumstances of history. With what other aspects of social life can we articulate changes and transformations in visual and material styles? More generally, I aim here to consider aesthetic categories as meaning-forming processes (Munn 1986) to reckon with time and history and to make sense of ongoing historical transformations in indigenous lived worlds.

Chromatism, in the way I use it in this work, is thus an ethnographic category that articulates Guna people's knowledge of visual and material processes with their notions of time and history. As I will show below Guna chromatism

resonates with other Amerindian versions of 'chromatic thought' emphasising 'a gradual continuity between beings in the world' (Gonçalves 2010:119)[i]. Crucial to my argument will be showing that the historicity unveiled by chromatism is a 'time-reckoning' device based on specific mechanisms sensitive to the gradual transition from continuous to discrete systems, and vice-versa. In brief, to become sensitive to the chromatic history of Guna people we need to attune ourselves to the manifold transitions between smaller and bigger intervals in relevant units of space and time, whereby changes between types of intervals are indexical of historical circumstances. Time and history might therefore acquire a different quality according to their relative intensity.

The spatial arrangements of villages and the aesthetic arrangements of designs index a specific social agency informed by an engagement with the past and the future, that is a specific historicity. These spatio-temporal arrangements form therefore a 'background of historicity upon which everyday life is lived' (Hirsch and Stewart 2005:270). The generative power of chromatism, as a continuous system containing in itself the possibility of multiple futures, can be gleaned from Guna accounts of the past and from practices concerning valued artefacts. Looking at the making and circulation in time and space of Guna women's blouses is therefore studying one of the 'unforeseen modes and practices through which a community may engage with and produce knowledge about its pasts while anticipating its futures' (*ibid*:267).

Mola

On an April evening of 2003, in the village of Ogobsuggun in the San Blas Archipelago, I was discussing the designs made by Guna women on their mola blouses with Raquél Morris, a Guna woman then in her early seventies, and her daughter Nixia Pérez, at the time in her mid thirties. The central part of this garment consists of a front and a back panel each formed by two or more layers of fabric of different colours which are cut and sewn together to create multi-coloured designsii **[Fig. 1 - Nixia Pérez sewing *morgoniggad* with subject of *sergan mola* (*aswe mola*, 'avocado mola') photo P. Fortis 2003; Fig. 2 – Nixia Pérez unfinished *morgoniggad* with subject of *sergan mola* photo P. Fortis 2003]**. Our conversation revolved around the different styles of *mola* making which Guna women distinguish on the basis of the number of colours and panels of fabric used and the techniques employed in their making (see Salvador 1997 for an extended discussion of the different styles and techniques of *mola* making).

After a while Raquél commented that the *molagana* (pl.) that younger women make nowadays are *nia*, 'devil', because they do not defend women and allow malicious spirits to get close to them. Raquél's remark echoed that of many other women and men whom I heard saying that the contemporary designs made by Guna women were dangerous and compromised the protective quality of *mola*. These designs included a whole variety of subjects: animals such as jaguars, crocodiles, stingrays; monsters; as well as subjects from urban life like cars, aeroplanes, helicopters, characters from comics, sport and politics, and images from branded products and advertisements. My argument through the paper will be the Raquél's comment contains a reflection on time and therefore on the

changing circumstances of history that makes it relevant for a wider discussion beyond its immediate reference to Guna women's designs on their blouses.

These *molagana* are generally referred to as *morgoniggad*, literally 'with lots of fabric', meaning that they are composed of two and generally more layers of different colours, often using filling motifs stitched on top of or in between layers and embroidery. These are stunningly colourful molagana. **[Fig. 3 - Morgoniggad photo P. Fortis 2003; Fig. 4 - Nebagiryai Lopez wearing morgoniggad with her daughter Megan wearing a dress decorated with mola designs photo P. Fortis 2014]**

These designs of contemporary *molagana* were often contrasted by Guna people with those of *sergan molagana*, the 'ancient' or 'old' ones[iii], which represent standardized themes such as for example *yar burba mola*, the *mola* of the 'image of the mountain', *gole igar mola*, the *mola* of the 'path of the hermit crab' **[Fig. 5 - *Sergan mola* (*gole igar mola*, *mola* of the 'path of the hermit crab') photo P. Fortis 2003]**, *sue mola*, the *mola* of the 'rainbow', or *gwage mola*, the *mola* of the 'heart'. In general, *sergan molagana* are made with fewer layers of fabric than contemporary ones and without embroidery, and therefore have fewer colours. From the point of view of a Western observer contemporary *molagana* however are decidedly 'figurative', in contrast to the more 'geometric' style of ancient ones (see Fortis 2012)[iv].

Ancient *molagana* were still in use at the time when Raquél and I had our conversation and are still made now alongside contemporary ones[v]. In some

cases the subject of a *sergan mola* is sewn with additional details and colours so that it would also classify as *morgoniggad*. Even so, 'ancient', *sergan*, and 'contemporary', *morgoniggad*, *molagana* have clearly developed at different periods during the twentieth century. So, what does their contrast - in the eyes of women like Raquél - mean and what does it tell us about changes in the Guna lived world in the last century? Despite the copious literature on *mola*, its ethno-aesthetics, commercialization, identity value and changing meanings, no serious attempt has been made to track its 'value transformations' historically, defined by Munn as 'the "internal relations" that give [social acts] *significant* form and that specify the nature of the value produced' (1986:6). Below I argue that such transformations occurred in line with, and are indeed helpful to think of as transformations in Guna social life. That is, I suggest that the oscillation between the 'discrete' and the 'continuous', as qualitative experiences of space and time, relates to the use respectively of fewer and more colours in *mola* and informs Guna lived experience in and of history[vi].

Chromatism: sociological models

Lévi-Strauss used the concept of 'chromatism' in the *Raw and the Cooked* to show that Amerindian *myth-logics* variously elaborate on the passage from the 'continuous' to the 'discrete' as either a semantic impoverishment of an original set or the fragmentation of a chromatic being – the anaconda or the rainbow (see Stolze Lima 2005:49). In his discussion of Bororo, Ojibwa and Tikopian social organizations he showed that these three societies explain that their contemporary social forms emerged as discrete social systems derived from continuous ones as the result of the actions of different mythological characters.

In the case of the Bororo the original continuity of a village that was becoming worryingly overpopulated was broken when a culture hero killed those people who brought him gifts that he did not approve of (1969:51). The result was the formation of contemporary Bororo villages composed of a limited number of clans with different status. Arguing that 'in any field a system of significances can be constructed only on the basis of discrete quantities' (*ibid*:53), Lévi-Strauss pointed out that the transition between the pre- and the post-cosmological entails a passage from the continuous to the discrete. Such transition, in most Amerindian myths, is also related to a change from a condition where humans and animals shared the same lived world to a condition where each species became different and occupied a specific space in the world. In brief, according to Lévi-Strauss, the discrete is the precondition that renders social life - and its projection into the past and the future - thinkable and therefore manageable.

A liveable cosmos is thus constructed of spatially separated human social groups and non-human species whereby relations and exchange are established on the basis of recognized differences. Most importantly, the awareness of such differences is the precondition of a safe and viable social life. However, this separation, and more generally the passage from a continuous to a discrete condition, is not irreversible or linear. The continuous, as a state of communication between different beings, remains an underlying potential in the daily life of Amerindians and is actualized in ritual and shamanism. The passage from continuous to discontinuous is thus conceived as a dialectical movement that flows in both directions and is indeed not irreversible (Fávero Gongora 2007:47)[vii].

As I shall show below, Guna oral history describes different patterns of village organization. The passage from the continuous to the discrete is evidenced in their origin stories. The return to a transformed state of the continuous, in terms of village life, is instantiated by the current predominant layout of Guna island villages where population has been reaching the physical limits of the San Blas islands after more than one hundred years of population growth. Therefore, in the case of Guna people, continuous and discrete appear to be poles of an oscillation, which renders history and time socially meaningful. Let us consider some comparative examples.

In her masterful analysis of the social life and philosophy of Yudjá people (Central Brazil) Stolze Lima (2005) discusses their foundational myth, in which the 'magnificent shaman' distributed portions of cotton string to the heads of cognatic groups. After receiving their portion of string each group dispersed along the middle of the Xingu River where the Yudjá nowadays live. In discussing the differences between the Yudjá case and those analysed by Lévi-Strauss, Stolze Lima elaborates a new model in which the passage from the continuous to the discrete is based on a 'formal heterogeneity between the two conditions, since the quantity of the former is constituted by individuals, and that of the latter by cognatic groups' (*ibid*:51). Furthermore, she argues that 'distance provides a key to understand social discontinuity' according to the Yudjá (*ibid*:52), thus linking her argument to the essential temporal dimension of post-colonial Amazonian societies as previously discussed by Clastres (1974:38-63).

The sociological model described by Stolze Lima is one where heterogeneous multiplicity and asymmetry are at the core of how the Yudjá think of their contemporary social life. Although the Yudjá myth does not speak of the passage from continuous to discrete in strictly Lévi-Straussian terms (as either the semantic impoverishment of an original continuum, or the differential apportioning of a chromatic being), it lends itself to analysis by focusing on temporality as a key dimension of indigenous social life. The 'differential removal' of kinship groups triggered by the magnificent shaman distributing portions of cotton string is at the same time spatial and temporal. The Yudjá myth thus elaborates on 'a passage from an inertial, undifferentiated continuum, to an active, differentiator continuum, creator of intensive, qualitative differential positions, subordinated to the forces that come to act in it or of duration' (Stolze Lima 2005:54).

The distribution of what is effectively an item of body decoration – cotton string – was the trigger that set in motion a new Yudjá spatio-temporal order which was already a dynamic system equipped to reckon with the vicissitudes of history. Through the same act the magnificent shaman inscribed a new form of difference within Yudjá society – between senior and junior, kinspersons and affines, Yudjá, other indigenous peoples and white people. Such difference is nowadays manifested in what Stolze Lima defines as 'chromatic sociality', rendered meaningful by collective drinking festivals (*ibid*:273).

The inscription of difference - internal and external - and temporality are simultaneous acts, as can be evinced from a number of Amerindian myths about

the origin of body decoration (see Fávero Gongora 2007). The passage from the continuous to the discrete thus provides a meaningful conceptual tool to envisage the origin of human sociality as a state characterized by the interplay of contrasting forces, simultaneously pulling towards order and chaos. Oscillation between these two states is seen as a permanent condition that despite being fraught with the perils of entropy provides Amerindian social systems with an inherent dynamism[viii]. The 'insertion of temporality in the structure' is thus the way in which the reverse movement (from discrete to continuous) was envisaged by Lévi-Strauss (see also Lolli 2005:100). Continuity, for Lévi-Strauss, is the irruption of events and material reality in the discrete structures of mythical thought. Diachrony may well represent the limits of mythical thought, but is nonetheless necessary for it to survive. I argue that chromatism, as the exploration of small and big differences, allows for an appreciation of the dialectic between meaning forming practices, such as *mola* making, and people's perception of time and history.

Time and history

In discussing the relation between the synchronic and the diachronic and addressing the problem of the relation between structure and event, Gell argued that 'synchronic classification does not conflict with diachronic historicity. […] The "conflict" is between this attitude, faith in the ability of a certain set of event-and-process classifications to embrace all foreseeable events, and the unfortunate tendency of real events not to occur normatively' (1992:53).

I nonetheless disagree with Gell on his assessment of Lévi-Strauss' treatment of time as an abstract anthropological model (*ibid*:24). His comment echoes Fabian's claim regarding the work of Lévi-Strauss that '[t]ime is removed from the realm of cultural praxis and given its place in that of pure logical forms' (1983:56). The latter commentator, in being carried away by his sweeping criticism of most anthropologists' denial of coevalness, overlooked an important point: it would be hardly sustainable in fact to argue that myth does not pertain to the realm of cultural praxis. Myth and other forms of everyday life communication are key aspects of how people the world over come to terms with the shifting circumstances of their history (Turner 1988; Carrithers 2008). Despite Lévi-Strauss' emphasis on the synchronic reproduction of symbolic systems at the expense of diachronic change a careful reading of his work has proved instrumental in exploiting its potential for an historical analysis of indigenous lived worlds (Sahlins 1981; Gow 2001).

Indigenous historicities provide a way to explore continuity and transformations through incorporating diachrony into the 'phenomenological and pragmatic aspects of social life (Fausto and Heckenberger 2007:9). Transcending the Western 'ownership' of history and including different forms of social praxis such as dreams, songs, performance and rituals in what counts as history (Hirsch and Stewart 2006:266) provides a way forward to unfold alternative modes of 'time reckoning'; the latter being understood as the meaningful ongoing everyday processes informing specific cultural, historical and experiential categories of time (Munn 1992).

Specific rhetorical strategies, Carrithers has shown, are used to respond to events, to render known the unknown, to make sense of 'the eventfulness of things' (2008:162). Focusing on the space between happening and human response, he shows how ethnography is able to shed light on specific social and historical forms of agency. I argue that the same can be done with regard to images and art forms more generally. By considering the making of valued objects as expressive strategies in coming to terms with the eventfulness of life I suggest we could learn something new about the *quality* of people's memory of their past.

It has been argued that certain types of images incorporate the memory of historical occurrences and can be read according to their intrinsic capacity to transmit them (Severi 2015). Furthermore, a focus on the *making* of particular artworks not only reveals the specific work of social and genealogical memory but also enables an understanding of how relations are conceived, made and unmade, and how they transform through time (Küchler 2002, 2005). It is by drawing on these approaches that I aim to make sense of Raquél's comment on the 'devilish' quality of contemporary *molagana*. As I will show below, the dialectic between continuous and discontinuous, introduced above, provides a model for an analytical approximation of indigenous historicities. Before doing that let us take a closer look at the implications of chromatism for aesthetics and temporality.

Chromatism: the aesthetics of intervals

The mythical theme of the origin of diseases, or of fish poison, is the other key element in Lévi-Strauss' discussion of chromatism. He showed that 'throughout the whole of tropical America diseases are generally attributed to the rainbow' (1969: 278). The rainbow and its transformation, the serpent, are also responsible for the creation of the zoological order[ix]. This theme is evidenced, for example, in a myth told by the Arecuna where birds killed the rainbow-snake and cut its body into pieces. Each bird took a piece which, according to its colour and nature, gave to each species its distinguishing cry, bodily features and coloured plumage (*ibid*:262). Disease and poison, like their originators rainbow and snake, are 'chromatic' entities with 'diatonic' effects[x]: meaning that they either create large gaps in the populations affected by them, or are responsible for the differentiation of animal species (*ibid*:319)[xi].

In the myths of some Amerindian societies Lévi-Strauss noted we find a real hatred of polychromaticism, such as like among the Bororo and the Ticuna, where necklaces and pottery are persistently monochromatic[xii]. In the myths told by other societies, on the other hand, polychromaticism is fully embraced. He thus suggests that we need to consider what type of polychromatism is involved in each case: whether it is one made up of short intervals where colours shade into one another – as in the rainbow - which presupposes cosmological continuity and the blurring of boundaries between animals and humans; or one made up of greater intervals where bold colours and contrasting sets create neat boundaries, which presupposes cosmological discreteness and the separation of humans and animals.

It is the 'dialectic of intervals', Lévi-Strauss concludes, that enables us to link the genesis of the social and the zoological orders to the origin of diseases (short intervals signify danger; long intervals signify safety). Chromatic entities - be they culture heroes, snakes, rainbows, epidemics, poison or floods – are the originators of the fragmentations of previously continuous quantities and of the ordering of the universe into apprehensible elements.

The theme of how the dialectic of intervals pervades not only Amerindian mythology but also their visual style and social life has been examined in detail by Fávero Gongora (2007). In her comparative study of Guianese ethnography and mythology the author shows the centrality of the creation and maintenance of differences internal to local social groups. While, she argues, differences *between* indigenous groups have traditionally been at the forefront of anthropological studies, differences *within* groups have been largely overlooked. Her analysis shows the scope for looking at indigenous social formations as characterized by a state of 'multiplicity' irreducible to the One. 'Each element is in a process of *continual variations* or *intensive differentiation* in relation to other elements and of permanent production of new agencies' (*ibid*:98).

There is therefore an intrinsic temporality in the chromatic order of things. As I will show with regards to Guna aesthetics, the dialectic of intervals provides a perspective for looking at social change and reckoning with time's passage that integrates individual and collective experiences. Chromatism is thus an experiential category that enables coming to terms with modulations across a differential continuum in social life.

Core visual and material processes in Guna daily life, such as making women's blouses and village patterns, encapsulate and manifest biographical and group time. When considered in their broader social, ecological and historical context these processes reveal their meaningfulness, that is, their role in creating meaning vis-á-vis the changing circumstances of history. Indigenous aesthetic categories, or anyone else's aesthetic category for that matter (see Baxandall 1972), possess an intrinsic temporality that allows for historical analysis.

The fabric of time: biographical time

Let us look first at the intergenerational significance of Raquél's claim. *Mola* is an item of clothing that is associated with Guna women's biographical cycle. While young girls in Ogobsuggun may learn to make *molagana* they rarely wear them. Adult married women with children instead are expected to sew *molagana* and wear them, if not all the time, certainly when they are outside their home. As another woman from Ogobsuggun told me in 2003, women wear *mola* made of only two layers, *abbinnigwad*, when they carry out their work at home **[Fig. 6 - Wagala Díaz holding a nettle and wearing *abbinnigwad* photo P. Fortis 2004]**. But when young women go out at night to visit their friends they usually wear *mola* with lots of fabric, *morgoniggad*.

As I have observed on many occasions since my first visit to Ogobsugun in 2003, most young women wear *morgoniggad* when they go out to buy something at a local shop, to check what the Colombian traders are selling at the peer, to visit a relative or a friend, or to go to the local bank branch in Usdubu. Nebagiryai Lopez

- Raquél's forty-years-old daughter–in-law - told me in April 2017 that young women would feel embarrassed to go out wearing a bi-coloured *mola*; it would be as if they did not have money. For earlier generations of women, she said, a woman's wealth was manifested through wearing gold jewels such as earrings, necklaces and nose-rings; now wealth is shown by wearing colourful *molagana* that require a considerable economic investment in buying the fabric and time investment in sewing enough of them so that they can wear a different one for different public occasions[xiii].

The highly coloured *molagana* worn by young women boast a variety of ancient and contemporary subjects, while elder women wear mostly two-layered *molagana* decorated with 'geometric' designs. The type of *mola* a woman wears is thus related to her age and position in the life cycle. As Margiotti (2013) has convincingly shown, sewing *mola* is linked to Guna women's fertility and their pivotal position in the reproduction of households as both mothers of new-borns and wives of in-marrying men. Making *mola*, Margiotti argues, is meaningfully linked to making kinship, insofar as it is an activity that involves both young women's reproductive capacity and elder women's passing on of their knowledge of that capacity to younger women. All this is also manifested by the fact that adult women sew *mola* most intensively when they are pregnant and less busy with other daily chores.

The connection between women's capacity for reproduction and *mola* is evinced both by the embedment of sewing and wearing this item of clothing in the Guna daily production of kinship ties and by the *mola*'s intrinsic material qualities as a

layered, colourful and designed item of clothing[xiv]. These qualities, as I showed elsewhere (Fortis 2014), manifest the articulation between artefactual and biological processes in Guna lived experience.

The relation between chromatism and fertility is made explicit in Guna myths which highlight the importance of the discrete apportioning of colours in relation to the creation of different living species. Great Mother, the female demiurge, generated all animal and plant species through her menstruations of different colours. Moreover, in the case of important plant species used in healing rituals varieties of the same species are named using different colour terms. Chapin noted that 'the chanter calls eight kinds of cacao shaman: *yolin*-colored (red), blue, two-colored (*sakoalet*: "ripening"), white-faced, black, fire-colored, blue two-colored, and white-faced two-colored' (1983: 512). Similarly, the rainbow is associated with the fecundity of the earth. As Filemón Herrera, a Guna man from Usdubu, told me in April 2017, 'If there is no rainbow the earth is not productive. The earth menstruates, like a woman. The world has to be always in motion. If it is still, disease will come.' [xv]

Guna myths associate generative powers with the chromatic efficacy of Great Mother. In myths haematology and chromaticism are thus linked to a fertile and generative agency. Pregnancy is a state associated with heightened openness to the agency of non-human beings and therefore subject to many behavioural and dietary restrictions (see Margiotti 2010). Menstrual blood separates humans from spirits and is considered taboo during rituals and shamanic séances.

Great Mother is a truly chromatic being. She embodies beauty and danger and is capable of generating all living beings. She contains difference within herself manifested by differently coloured menstrual blood. As such, internal difference is able to generate difference in the world in the form of different species. As the above example of cacao varieties shows, difference ramifies within individual species, so that, as with the great snake of Amazonian mythology, 'each time we take a *part* as the *whole*, we are surprised at its capacity to auto-fragment' (Fávero Gongora 2007:129).

Great Mother's fertility is dangerous if not properly harnessed by human beings with regard to women's generative capacity. Women's fertility, as shown by the paramount importance of taboos during pregnancy, is a powerful state that can have negative effects on sick people - themselves dangerously open to the predatory alterity of animal entities. The point here is that women have the capacity to internally fragment and generate new beings different from themselves. Such capacity is not qualitatively dissimilar from the skin-shedding immortality of snakes and trees (Fortis 2014). The only difference is that through their own internal 'skin-shedding' – menstruation and the capacity of begetting children - women provide a collective form of immortality, kinship. By containing and generating difference in the form of other (potential) human beings women are themselves chromatic beings, with the proviso that their generative capacity depends on the collaboration of other beings such as men and plant medicines, the latter used to stimulate and increase fertility.

Raquél's comment was thus about intergenerational relations. When she said to me that younger women's designs were 'like devil' she must have been thinking of the proliferation of new extravagant foreign designs from her perspective of an older woman who would wear two-layered *mola* with 'geometric' designs and not go out much visiting friends and kinspeople. She had passed her reproductive age and will have looked reproachfully on younger women's potentially adulterous behaviour. It might not be too far-fetched to suggest that excessively colourful designs representing non-Guna subjects were seen by Raquél as the manifestation of younger women's unrestrained and potentially dangerous fertility.

Knowledge about genealogical relations is not, as far as I know, much elaborated verbally among Guna people, and I have found it is often the case that it is difficult for women and men to remember the names of long dead relatives. What is passed down from mother to daughter is the qualitative knowledge about kinship relations. When she reaches puberty a girl is told who it is appropriate to play with or not, as some boys might be future potential marriage partners and therefore not appropriate playmates (Margiotti 2010:139-176). Such knowledge is further manifested in making *mola* as the expression of adult women's lifelong knowledge of kinship[xvi]. Sewing *mola* is not only about creating beautiful garments, it is also about making visible the creative capacities of adult women acquired through kinship. *Mola* is therefore both the manifestation and the means of reproduction of kinship. By the same token *mola* can also manifest badly acquired or inappropriately mastered knowledge, as Raquél hinted through her pointed remark. Given women's potential for proliferating

difference - in the worst-case scenario even in the form of non-human offspring - it is not surprising that *mola* might index such dangerous knowledge through an intensification of chromatism, that is, the shortening of chromatic intervals. To consider contemporary *mola* solely as the outcome of cultural influences from the Western world manifested in the appearance of non-traditional designs is therefore to overlook its very nature.

The fabric of time: group time

I shall now consider another aspect of Raquél's remark, that of intergenerational change and deep time; namely, the social changes that she had witnessed in her lifetime considered within the framework of Guna history in the past few centuries. Growing up in the 1940s and as a young adult woman in the 1950s and 60s, Raquél will have observed the progressive opening up of her world to Panamanian society and more generally to foreign culture. Despite earlier sporadic encounters contact with urban life became more regular from the 1960s when Guna women started to travel with their children to join their husbands working in Panama City or Colón. By the same token, life in the island villages of San Blas was also rapidly changing. Men wage-working in the city and women commercializing *mola* provided new sources of income with the consequent influx of new goods. In the villages women had a primary role in economic transactions, which not only gave them a central place in the household economy but also meant they were dealing directly with non-Guna traders (Swain 1989). While these economic changes and interactions with Panamanian society and Colombian traders were managed through new forms of internal political and economic control by Guna people (Hirschfeld 1977a),

another perhaps more critical change was taking place: Guna villages were expanding dramatically within the limited space of the San Blas islands and with severely limited possibilities of fission – i.e. the creation of new villages became much more difficult once most of the nearby islands considered fit for habitation had already been occupied by other villages, and moving back to the mainland was not considered to be an option.

Since their move from the coast to the San Blas islands between the middle of the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s Guna villages had been steadily growing demographically. A village would split resulting in either two autonomous villages on the same island or in a new village being founded on an unoccupied island nearby. Usdubu and Ogobsuggun are themselves the result of such a fission which occurred only a few years after people moved onto the island in 1903. A census published by Nördenskiold (1938:13-14) and compiled by Ruben Pérez Kantule in 1929 shows that before the scission the village had 2344 inhabitants[xvii]. Although there is no census for the villages before they moved to the islands it is safe to assume that the population was considerably smaller. One reason for moving to the islands was in fact to avoid the epidemics spread by mosquitoes on the coast.

The move to the islands was nonetheless the last of a number of moves that Guna people had been making for a considerably long period of time. Reaching the coast had been part of a process of moving out of the Darién forest where conflicts with other indigenous peoples and Spaniards had been constant for more than two centuries (Salcedo Requejo 1908). At the same time, this move

was also functional to increased trade relations with pirates, merchants and other would-be settlers on the San Blas coast (Gallup Díaz 2008).

The *mola* is one aspect of Guna life that has emerged from such engagements. Presumed to have been originally a long monochromatic tunic developed but only rarely used in the late 1600s when Guna people were given cloth as an exchange good by the Spaniards (*Ibid*: para.183-198), it was subsequently decorated with a narrow strip with coloured patterns at its bottom edge in the mid to late 1800s (see Salvador 1997; Marks 2016). From the early 1900s it became the blouse that we now know, incorporating sleeves and yoke made with industrially printed fabric **[Fig. 7 - *mola* blouse panel collected by Lady Richmond Brown in 1922 courtesy of Pitt-Rivers Museum num. 1924.46.68; Fig. 8 - *mola* blouse panel donated by Lady Richmond Brown in 1922 courtesy of Pitt-Rivers Museum num. 1924.46.67; Fig. 9 - two Guna women wearing *mola* blouses, face paint, nose rings, earrings, coin necklaces, arm and leg bands, circa 1920 courtesy of National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution NAA INV 04285300]**. Initially Guna women used fewer panels of fabric, but this progressively changed and more layers and colours were introduced, reflecting the increasing availability of industrially produced fabric of different colours obtained through traders plying the coast and from dealers in the city[xviii].

According to the English surgeon Lionel Wafer's observations during his sojourn in Darién in 1681, Guna people practiced body painting. In daily life men did not use clothing, while women wore a blue cotton apron. Red, blue and yellow dyes

were used to draw figures of persons, animals, birds and trees on men's and women's bodies (1888:84). During collective celebrations, the surgeon observed, men and women wore fabric clothing covering their entire body, along with several necklaces strung with coloured glass beads, shells and animal teeth. Gold nose pendants and earrings were also used by both sexes, with persons of higher status wearing larger and more elaborately decorated ones. Helms (1981:54) has pointed out the continuity of colours between XVIIth century body painting and contemporary *mola*, and suggesting an even deeper temporal link with pre-Columbian polychrome ceramic discovered in the Isthmus of Panama. Despite the difficulty of adequately assessing this claim beyond apparent stylistic continuities, I would suggest that what stands out here is the shift from complex body decoration used by both sexes in the 17th century to complex body decoration used only by women in the 20th century. Since if bodily adornments were used by both sexes in the past it is possible that contemporary women's clothing has taken on a complexity and diversity of meaning and functions reflecting the changes that Guna life has undergone over the past centuries.

As Raquél's daughter-in-law, Nebagiryai Lopez, confirmed to me, *mola* manifests young women's wealth. Hirschfeld (1977a) noted this forty years ago when *mola* was well on the way to being widely commercialized and becoming increasingly polychromatic (see also Salvador 1997). While for elder women like Raquél *mola* is an index of biographical and intergenerational change, for younger women like Nebagiryai it is an index of successful economic relations. It signifies both a woman's successful marriage with a husband able to generate income through wage work and her own successful management of any number of different

forms of trade such as selling *mola*, money-lending, or running a local shop. Needless to say, such manifold forms of trade entail relations with different forms of alterity which themselves are indexed in contemporary *mola* designs.

Some questions however remain to be answered. Why has *mola* evolved at such a crucial historical moment when Guna people began to engage in intensive and sustained relations with non-indigenous peoples? Why has it become so strikingly polychromatic over the past century? The change in *mola* style has been so far analysed solely from the external and utilitarian point of view that sees as its driving factor the increased availability of foreign goods (Salvador 1978; Tice 1995). I would propose another perspective, that of long-term changes in village patterns and social relations as described by Guna people themselves and extending in the past before they moved to the San Blas islands between the nineteenth and the twentieth century. These changes, I suggest, have been an important driving force in the development of the polychromatic style of *mola*[xix].

Out of the forest

The visual density of *mola* was equated to the density of houses in Guna island villages by Nixia Pérez, Raquél's daughter, who once commented 'how inconceivable a life seemed without kinspersons around her, like that of some mainland Darién indigenous people who live in scattered houses near the Colombian border, so remarkably different from the nucleated and crowded villages of San Blas' (Margiotti 2013: 2). Why did Nixia use the example of scattered houses in the forest to describe an undesirable way of living? I would

suggest that life in the forest is associated with an ancestral life that is no longer considered suitable by many Guna island dwellers today. The 'scattered houses' in the forest are an historical image of the discrete while the 'nucleated and crowded' island villages are a present image of the continuous. Let us therefore turn to how they envisage the life of their ancestors and the origin of their people in the forest.

On many occasions I was told that Guna ancestors lived on the banks of Ogiggidiwar, the river Atrato in north western Colombia whose sources are on the slopes of the Western Cordillera and which flows northwards into the Urabá Gulf where it forms a large, swampy delta. According to a story collected by Simión Brown and narrated by chief Tomás de Leon in 2004 (Brown 2005) the ancestors of Guna people after repeated clashes with their neighbours, the Emberá, moved away from the Atrato river and established several villages on the banks of the Chucunaque river in what is now Panama and on its tributaries flowing southwards from the San Blas Cordillera.

Subsequent villages were founded on further tributaries and nearby rivers progressively moving northwestward within the Darién forest, reaching the San Blas Cordillera and eventually crossing it toward the Caribbean coast. From there, around one hundred and fifty years ago, Guna people started moving to the islands of the San Blas Archipelago (Nördenskiold 1938: 167-175).

I would suggest reading these historical narratives in conjunction with the Guna myth of the 'tree of salt', *baluwala*, which describes how edible crops were

discovered by the octuplet heroes after felling the mighty tree (Fortis 2012:33-36). One version of this myth concludes by telling how the rivers, the sea and the islands of Guna Yala originated from the scattered pieces of the trunk and branches of the felled tree (Wagua 2000:44-53). It is tempting to read this myth topographically, seeing the trunk of the tree as the Atrato, its branches as the tributaries of the Chucunaque and its canopy as the San Blas islands. We would therefore have here a topographical and diachronic instantiation of the dialectic between the continuous and the discrete. The story of *baluwala* seems thus to combine the origin of edible plants, that is of proper human social life, with that of the islands where Guna people live nowadays.

As Guna people in Ogobsuggun told me, though, in ancient times they lived in a village on the Atrato. It would also be tempting to consider the ancient village on the Atrato as pertaining exclusively to the historical memory of people from Ogobsuggun. This in turn would imply that each contemporary Guna village has its own origin story of the village on the Atrato, making this original village intrinsically multiple or, as Lolli suggested, 'we have seen that continuity, expressed in the system, is made of discontinuity' (2005:55). This ancient village represents a version of the continuous that already contained difference within it. It was followed by the breaking up and branching out of the Guna population into smaller groups which founded several villages on the banks of smaller rivers, and thereafter bigger and relatively more stable island villages. Historically the village on the Atrato gave rise to several groups through a process of fragmentation triggered by warfare with other indigenous groups like the Emberá (Wassén 1955), and with the Spaniards (Gallup Díaz 2008). A new

version of the continuous, contemporary Guna island villages, thus integrate historical developments into unprecedented settlement forms[xx].

The image of the fragmented tree, generating rivers, islands and edible plants, is also highly reminiscent of the fragmentation of the chromatic body of the great snake of Amazonian mythology discussed above; a chromatic being through whose fragmentation internal societal differences were created, as Hugh-Jones (1993) describes in the case of the Tukano origin myth according to which the ancestors were vomited up by the ancestral anaconda at different points on its journey up the Rio Negro. In this case the 'differential removal' of social groups was generated by a being on whose skin all designs and colours were inscribed.

As I have argued elsewhere (Fortis 2014), a comparative analysis of Guna and other Amerindian myths suggests an association between the bark of trees and the skin of the anaconda: designs were first seen on the bark of particular trees by the Guna heroine Nagegiryai. This would support considering the tree of salt as a chromatic being, like the anaconda, whose fragmentation generated the differential removal of Guna social groups in the forest. Their further move to the islands would thus be seen as countering fragmentation by distancing themselves from the quintessential chromatic beings: the trees. It should not be surprising then that Guna women evolved their polychromatic style of clothing once they have moved to the San Blas islands, as the next section explains.

Island sociology

Each river village in the forest resulting from the fission of the original village on the Atrato is described in Guna narratives as a kinship group headed by a senior couple, a 'grandfather' and a 'grandmother', *dada* and *muu* (Nördenskiold 1938:22-23), their daughters and unmarried sons, their sons-in-law and their grandchildren. Thus, in their kinship make-up, riverine settlements mirror present-day Guna households. As it usually happens in contemporary island villages that when a married couple starts having grandchildren they move away from the wife's parents' house and create a new household of which they are the senior couple, it seems very plausible that this form of neolocal residence resulted in the creation of new villages in the ancient context of Guna riverine settlements.

Once Guna people had moved to the San Blas islands, however, these fissions became increasingly more impractical and the reverse movement - from discrete to continuous settlements – began to take place. The new island villages constituted a new form of settlement which I argue is more akin to the original village on the river Atrato than to the smaller riverine settlements in the forest. In brief, Guna people created a new form of village life on the islands that is highly reminiscent of the ancient prototypical village of their historical narratives. Whereas in the story outlined above the passage is from a continuous village form to discrete settlements, contemporary island villages have internalized discrete discontinuity (the multiple riverine villages) in individual island settlements. Furthermore, while it is conceivable that inter-village exogamy was the preferred marriage form at the time of riverine villages, village endogamy is the most favoured option today[xxi].

My point here is that we should look at contemporary Guna villages as a sort of concentration of villages forming a new continuum where relations with others - potential affines - have been internalized. Whereas riverine villages looked like kinship groups, island villages are formed by kinspeople, affines and unrelated people. This multiplication of social roles and relations, I suggest, has been a key aspect of the transformation of Guna social life in the past century. By implication, over this period Guna people have formed a new polity based on the articulation of the large San Blas villages and in response to the mounting pressures of the Panamanian state (Howe 1998; Martínez Mauri 2011). Interestingly enough they have done so by deftly avoiding the coagulation of centripetal forces (Fortis 2016) and by stressing the differences between each village. This latter aspect has been particularly striking to me, since I first expected to encounter a uniform Guna ethos and slowly discovered that differences between villages were often highlighted by my informants, ranging from views based on simple observation and curiosity to outright contempt.

Let us return to Raquél's original comment. I argued that her dislike of contemporary *mola* designs had something to do with coming to terms with the new complexity of Guna village life. Not only have villages become increasingly populated during Raquél's life, with less space to build new houses, but young people have also been finding it more difficult to identify suitable marriage partners: someone neither too distant nor too close.

The proliferation of new motifs in *mola* making, and its attendant increased polychromatism, has occurred in parallel to the intensification of Guna village life over the past century. On the one hand, the visual density of *mola* reflects the density of houses in the villages, as Margiotti (2013) notes (see also Sherzer & Sherzer 1976), on the other hand, the reduced (or intensified) chromatic intervals of highly polychromatic *molagana* reflect the increasing difficulty of clearly mapping social relations on the island[xxii]. I would therefore suggest that Guna young women have progressively adopted a newly chromatic style that is coextensive with the social changes that have taken place since their forefathers moved to the islands. But that is not to say that such changes occurred in isolation. On the contrary, they have been a function of Guna long-term engagements with foreigners of different kinds. Creating a quintessentially Guna dress out of foreign materials has allowed Guna women to meaningfully reckon with intergenerational time during a period of intense social change when the organization of their society has undergone considerable transformations.

Raquél's comment has thus a further significance in that it refers to Guna people's historical knowledge. In claiming that contemporary *mola* were 'devil', I suggest Raquél was making a point about the fading memory of life in the forest[xxiii]. Such memory is indexed by *sergan*, ancient, *molagana*, while *morgoniggad*, contemporary *molagana*, index the new chromatic sociality that has been emerging ever since the move to the islands. Despite the co-presence of both *mola* styles at the time when Raquél and I had our conversation, she clearly noticed the strong preference of young women for the highly polychromatic style of contemporary *molagana* at the expense of the style of ancient ones. Her

judgement thus entailed a realization of the transformation of the genealogical knowledge transmitted through the lived experience of Guna women making *mola*.

While I have so far focussed on the diachronic transformations indexed by *mola* I wish now to briefly consider the synchronic and spatial circulation of *mola*. This constitutes a complementary aspect that sheds light on a further aspect of Guna island sociality, namely its resilience.

Chromatic sociality

There is an instance in which the space-time of mola – biographical, intergenerational and historical - is articulated beyond individual villages and where differences between villages are downplayed. Puberty ceremonies, *inna*, are village-wide celebrations lasting from one to three days hosted by the girl's family which pays for the food and the fermented maize and sugar cane beer, itself called *inna*. A number of features of *inna* feasts play a role in bridging differences and discontinuity within and between villages as well as with the non-human world. First, these ceremonies have been traditionally the occasion during which families arrange marriages between their children (Prestan Simón 1975). Second, friends and distant relatives from other islands are usually invited to attend the feast. Third, the ritual chanter presiding at the celebration is in charge of luring animal spirits to participate and get drunk with their own brew, the smoke of tobacco produced by inebriated men and women.

Puberty ceremonies are therefore occasions in which villages are open to different forms of internal and external alterity. People from the same village that normally do not visit each other dance and sing together. Although arranged marriages are rarely practiced these days, sexual banter is widespread among young adults. Furthermore, the presence of people coming from other villages reminds the celebrants of those relatives who went to live elsewhere a long time ago, or those who have died, thus adding a spatio-temporal dimension to the festive mood (Fortis 2015:205).

Importantly, *inna* feasts are occasions for the dissemination and circulation of *mola* designs. Groups of young adult kinswomen from the same village wear *mola* especially sewn for the occasion with the same designs and colours. Once they have agreed on the design and style they start sewing their *mola* several months before the feast in order, as they say, to wear a 'uniform' during the celebration. In such a way designs are both disseminated within the same village, among kinswomen (Hirschfeld 1977b:159), and circulated between villages, through visitors. This might well be the reason why it is virtually impossible to track down the place of origin of any specific design, as intense circulation seems to have always been the case in Guna Yala.

The space-time of *mola* is thus amplified and reverberated through puberty ceremonies. Its temporal quality, which we have analysed above - involving biographical, intergeneration and historical aspects - is articulated with the spatial quality of intra-generational and inter-village exchange. Raquél's temporal perspective articulates with Nebagiryai's pragmatic perspective

focused on the wealth and transactional aspects of *mola*. By the same token the lived experience of both elder and young women is rendered meaningful through sewing and wearing *mola*. At a wider social level, relations between island villages are largely articulated through puberty ceremonies and rendered visible by the circulation of *mola* designs.

By downplaying internal and, to a certain extent, external differences by means of visual uniformity and their convivial mood puberty ceremonies display what Stolze Lima (2005) calls 'chromatic sociality'. Relations that are normally kept separate within and between villages are brought together in order to create a momentary frame where social boundaries are loosened and a sense of continuity is established. Despite this, differences do not disappear and during the inebriated phase of the celebration animosity and fights may still erupt. Beneath the appearance of uniformity and conviviality lie difference and antagonism. The exuberant festive mood does not hide or suppress differences inherent to daily life; what is celebrated is the capacity of Guna people to master differences and establish controlled relations with different kinds of others. The chromatic sociality of puberty ceremonies thus provides a frame to articulate relations between villages. In my view over the past century this has contributed to achieving the crucial political goal of fostering the integration of different villages without the need for developing a hierarchical centralized structure.

It is therefore not surprising that when the Panamanian guards tried to ban the celebration of puberty ceremonies and to prohibit Guna women from wearing *mola* during the first two decades of 1900 they were eventually met with the

fiercest resistance by Guna people, culminating in the 1925 revolt (see Howe 1998). Panamanian guards had unwittingly struck at the core of Guna social life. Another unwitting influence, albeit of a very different sort, was that of Peace Corps volunteers who in the 1960s endeavoured to teach Guna women to sew baby clothes in order to provide them with an activity generating an income. On finding that baby clothes did not appeal to the women, they took the latter's suggestion of commercializing *mola* instead, thus setting in motion the project that led to the creation of the Mola Cooperative in the 1970s. The Cooperative flourished for many years selling *mola* internationally and providing Guna women from different villages in San Blas with a reliable income (Tice 1996).

Before concluding, there is one final aspect of chromatism implicit in Raquél's comment that I will deal with below. Namely, her remark that contemporary *mola* designs attract predatory spirits instead of protecting Guna women.

Hyperchromatism

As I argued elsewhere (Fortis 2010), for Guna people the concept of design is intimately linked to their understanding of how human social praxis develops from gestation onwards. Design is an attribute of the human person that signifies his or her relation with non-human beings. At birth, designs show the link between humans and animals in the form of 'amniotic designs' on the head of some new-borns. Such designs, observed by midwives, provide the guide for adult specialists to prepare plant medicines aimed at separating the animal from the human and stimulating the emergence of human praxis. Amniotic designs are thus a perfect example of the genesis of the discrete. They manifest the inner

multiplicity of human beings, their potential to transform and become other than human. They are the precondition for separation and diversification. They foster the individuation of the manifold into discrete human life forms.

While having dealt above with the discrete at the sociological level, I shall now turn to how the oscillation between discrete and continuous is envisaged at the level of the person. Although amniotic designs enable the separation between human babies and animal attachments and allow for the emergence of different kinds of human social praxes – e.g. woodcarving, *mola* making, ritual specialisms, etc. - there is however a case where amniotic designs instantiate the opposite, that is, the continuity between the human and the animal. This is when a baby is born with his or her amniotic remains completely white. In such case the midwife would declare that a seer is born and their potential capacity to interact with the invisible non-human world will have to be fostered through medicine and initiation. White amniotic remains have designs that are not visible to human beings but are visible to the animal entities that strive to attach to the young seer and become visible to him or her through dreams. Their contrast against the amniotic background is beyond (or below) the threshold of human perception. We might describe them as white on white designs.

This is indeed a clear example of extreme polychromatism, or we could also say of hyperchromatism. The intervals between colours are reduced to the minimum and cease to be perceptible to human beings. Differing from the 'diatonic' designs discussed above, excessively 'chromatic' amniotic designs signify the continuity between the human and the animal (and the spiritual). The seer thus grows up

containing difference, as it were, inside him or herself. That difference which is projected outwards when human babies are born is now sealed inside the seer and will provide his or her capacity to explore the invisible world[xxiv].

White 'hyper-chromatic' amniotic designs stand on the pole of continuity and intensity; contrasting 'diatonic' amniotic designs stand on the pole of the discrete and extensive relations between human and animals. Two-layered *mola* designs tend to emphasize the more structured kinship perspective of older Guna women, while highly chromatic *mola* with 'lots of fabric' manifest younger women's proclivity to grapple with the intensive sociality of contemporary village life, which also includes intensive relations with foreigners.

While white amniotic designs are seen by and attract animal spirits, colourful *mola* designs are intended to ward them off. It might even be suggested that colours trap animal spirits in a way reminiscent of the *kolam*, the maze-like designs drawn on the threshold of houses in Southern India to repel demons (Gell 1998:84-86; see also Young 2006:176). Ancient *mola* style and diatonic amniotic designs thus share the quality of visualizing and mastering relations with animals for human beings. By enabling the separation from multiple animal spirits they foster the creation of individual human beings. Contemporary *mola* style, at least in Raquél's mind, seems to veer towards a dangerous continuity with animal, spirits, and also foreigners. By losing the diatonic quality of warding them off it risks attracting them.

Conclusions

Ancient *mola* style, as I have suggested above, retains the memory of life in the forest where relations with fellow human beings verged towards the discrete. Contemporary *mola* style proposes a new model of chromatic sociality that switches the focus from alterity relations with forest animals and spirits to relations with other forms of Others, such as Panamanians, Colombians and North Americans. While this has been a successful strategy for coping with the increasing pressures of foreigners in recent Guna history, it has nonetheless left open the problem of how to deal with such competing forms of alterity (see Velásquez Runk 2012). More importantly, it has brought face-to-face different generational perspectives on memory and history - a multiplicity of historicities.

Guna multiple and competing historical perspectives contribute a further view to what other anthropologists working with Panamanian indigenous peoples have discussed in terms of ambiguity between indigeneity and modernity (Howe 2009, Theodossopoulos 2016). The difference is subtle but important: it consists of the kind of questions that we allow ethnography to raise. The ambiguity between indigenous and modern, I argue, rests mostly on the side of anthropologists, regardless of how much they struggle to free themselves from it. Whereas the multiple perspectives on time and history that I have described above emerge from a dialogue between generations of Guna women, therefore offering a dynamic view that bypasses externally built ambiguities.

As I hope I have shown in this paper, Guna women's *mola* is a prime example of how relations are not only thought of and created through objects and visual forms but are also historicized. Drawing on the model of chromatism, so far only

applied synchronically by scholars, I have aimed to show its potential for a diachronic analysis of indigenous aesthetic categories. In brief, Guna 'chromatic history' is the outcome of specific 'time-reckoning' devices, such as *mola* making, that exploit that dynamic differential nature of the qualitative transition between discrete and continuous systems, and vice-versa. Further study will assess the cross-cultural applicability of this model which looks at aesthetics as a category in motion. What I wanted to point to here is the capacity of this model for unfolding aesthetics diachronically, taking stock of the perspective of those very people that render such aesthetics meaningful in their everyday life.

Raquél's comment has for me been a lesson in the multiple layers of *mola* spatio-temporal transformations and the concomitant transformations of Guna social life. It was only brought home to me after a long engagement with the Guna lived world. It is telling that at the time of our conversation, fifteen years ago, her remark passed almost unnoticed by me – although I did note it down. I have now come to think that the passing of biographical time understood as the unfolding of relations both within and between persons, is key to ethnography, and indeed to anthropology. Were it not for that conversation between Raquél, Nixia and myself, on that hot April evening of 2003, and for all my other conversations with many other Guna women and men, I would not have been able to visualize the complexity of *mola* as a prismatic instantiation of Guna lived experience in history. Nor would I have been able to appreciate the distinctiveness of Guna historicity as the unfolding and articulating of different but like individual experiences.

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[i] The theme of the interplay between sameness and difference in the mythology of North and South American indigenous peoples is dealt with by Lévi-Strauss in *The Story of Lynx* (1995), where he shows that small differences – as in the mythical treatment of twins – yeld big differences. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for raisning this point in relation to my analysis of Guna aesthetics in this article.

[ii] The literature on *mola* is rich. See for example Hirschfeld (1977a); Marks (2016); Salvador (1978, 1997); Sherzer & Sherzer (1976); Tice (1995).

[iii] Tice notes that 'In the 1980s, *molas* with geometric designs were called *muu*, or grandmother *molas*' (1995:58).

[iv] Lévi-Strauss quoted an Amazonian myth collected by Tastevin relating the story of a sprite teaching a woman how to paint polychromatic pottery. 'Then, with yellow clay, brown clay, and rucu (urucu: *Bixa orellana*) she drew beautiful variegated patterns and said to the young woman: "there are two kinds of painting: Indian painting and flower painting. The kind of painting that draws the lizard's head, the Great Snake's tracks, the branch of the pepper tree, the breast of

Boyusu the rainbow serpent, etc., is what we call Indian painting, and the other is the kind that consists in painting flowers' (1969:322-323).

[v] See Salvador (1997: 182-183) for a discussion of how Guna women in the 1980s began to take interest in early twentieth century *mola* designs. The author argues that while design motifs were copied from past Guna women in the 1980s paid new attention to details, sewing skills, techniques and the overall complexity of the composition.

[vi] For a discussion of how the notions of 'continuous' and 'discrete' are treated throughout the *oeuvre* of Lévi-and how old and new designs coexist Strauss, from their origin in linguistics to their development in comparative mythology, see Lolli (2005).

[vii] This should also warn us from unwittingly overlapping the dialectic between 'continuous' and 'discrete' with that between 'continuity' and 'change'. I thank Tania Lima for calling my attention to this point.

[viii] See Lévi-Strauss (1996) on Amerindian dualism as a 'state in constant disequilibrium', and Mosko and Damon (2005) for an anthropological take on chaos theory.

[ix] See Helms (1995) for a study of the rainbow-snake motif in ancient Panamanian pottery.

[x] Lévi-Strauss borrowed the concept of chromatism from music, where 'diatonic' is the scale that has mostly one tone intervals between notes while the 'chromatic' scale has all semi-tone intervals.

[xi] For other studies on the origin of colours of birds' feathers see Pressman (1991) and Escobar (2007:74).

[xii] See Dransart (2002) on the avoidance of talking about colours among elder women in Isluga (Northern Chile).

[xiii] See Stout (1947) and Hirschfeld for a discussion of *mola* as a 'wealth repository' (1977a:114).

[xiv] See Deger (2016) for an interesting counterpoint, showing how Yolngu people from Arnhem Land in Australia use layered digital mobile photography, a transformation of bark painting, to convey the emotions, memories and meanings of kinship.

[xv] It is worth noting that Guna elders say that it is taboo to point at the rainbow lest one's finger will become twisted (Brown & Martínez 2006:29; Nördenskiold 1938:394).

[xvi] See Gow (1999) for a similar case where women's designs, in this case among the Western Amazonian Yine (Piro), embody the biographically acquired knowledge of kinship.

[xvii] During fieldwork in 2003 the population of Usdubu and Ogobsuggun together was of more than 5.000 people, without taking into account all those who had moved to Panama City, which were likely to be around the same number.

[xviii] Marks notes an interesting change showing a deviation from layering towards using multi-coloured inserts of fabric. 'During the 1950s and 1960s fewer layers were used, but there were more inserts of fabric between layers' (2016:140).

[xix] It is interesting to note, incidentally, what Howe says regarding Guna people's own research interests. 'In native ethnography, on the other hand, molas are seldom mentioned and (as far as I know) never studied' (2009: 227).

[xx] The story of *baluwala* recalls of Lévi-Strauss' use of the image of a growing tree to describe the differential character of classificatory systems, whereby new classifications (smaller branches) are able to integrate historical contingencies (external natural forces) without throwing off balance the system (trunk) (1966:159-160). If one doubted for a moment the encyclopaedic knowledge of Amerindian mythology and ethnography of Lévi-Strauss it would be tempting to suggest that perhaps his mind was more 'savage' than he himself was ready to admit!

[xxi] It is interesting to note that in present times people from other villages are referred to as *kirmar*. This is a polysemantic word meaning 'foreigner', 'ancestor' and 'ghost'. In its singular form, *kilor*, it refers to MB. Following the current matrilocal residence pattern MB is the man who moves to another house. Rotalio Pérez told me in April 2017 that when his ancestors lived in the forest in small groups men married the granddaughters of their grandfather's brothers, who, I should add, were likely to live in another village.

[xxii] See Küchler (2005) for an analysis of how genealogical relations are mapped through quilting on the Cook islands in the shifting historical context generated by migraiton.

[xxiii] It has also to be noted that with the move to the islands Guna women abandoned gardening and women of Raquel's age would be among the last ones who used to help their husbands working in the gardens when they were younger.

[xxiv] Interestingly, the genesis of the internal multiplicity of seers is described in a Guna narrative that tells of the deeds of eight great shamans in the ancient past. While now different shamanic skills are acquired by individual figures, in ancient times different shamans possessed different capacities. This further instance of chromatism and multiplicity is an aspect of Guna historicity and sociality which deserves to be dealt with in another paper.

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